

# Linking the Classroom to the World: The Environment and EFL

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*By Susan Stempleski*

Over the past few years, recognition of the urgency of environmental problems has caused a quantum leap in the attention paid to “green” issues. With increasing frequency, the environment is turning up as the subject of newspaper and magazine articles, radio and television news reports, documentaries and feature films. This concern is reflected in schools around the world, where teachers of all subjects and at all grade levels are using the environmental theme as a means of linking the classroom to the world.

In the field of EFL, evidence of increasing interest in the environment is shown by a growing number of teaching textbooks and videos that use “green” issues as a single organizing framework for language study (e.g., Derwing and Cameron 1991a, 1991b; Martin 1991; Rabley 1989; Stempleski 1993a, 1993b). Other signs of interest include teacher education workshops and courses encouraging an EFL-environmental link in the classroom. For example, in 1990 the U.S. Peace Corps launched a series of workshops to train TEFL volunteers around the world in content-based teaching techniques for environmental awareness (Schleppegrell et al. 1992), and more recently, courses focusing on techniques and materials for environmental education have been introduced into the Teachers College, Columbia University MA Program in TESOL, in both New York City and Tokyo. Further evidence is provided by the 1992 proposal to create a Global, Environmental and Peace Education Interest Section within the international association of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL).

This article presents a rationale for incorporating environmental topics into language teaching and describes some activities that EFL teachers can use to integrate the study of the environment into language lessons.

## **The Environment and the EFL Class**

What have environmental issues got to do with teaching EFL? Shouldn't language teachers confine their concerns to the teaching of grammar, vocabulary, and communication skills? There are several good reasons for introducing the study of the environment to the EFL class. Some of the more compelling reasons follow.

*The environmental situation is urgent.* Problems such as rain forest destruction and animal extinction are so pressing that they demand a response from the entire educational community. As educators we have an ethical and personal responsibility to contribute to our students' awareness of environmental issues and to foster students' ability to make independent, responsible, and informed choices where the environment is concerned.

*Environmental topics are a rich source of content.* “Contextualizing” presentation and practice is a widely accepted rule of good language teaching. However, simply providing a situational context for language lessons organized around structures or functions may not be enough. Teachers are being urged to use content as a starting point for the selection of language items to be taught, rather than vice versa (Brinton et al. 1989). Teachers wishing to use content-based instruction will find that the environment can serve as a useful and relevant theme for integrating content with language-teaching objectives.

*Environmental issues are real.* By introducing environmental topics into the EFL class we can transcend the often narrow limits of language teaching and more effectively link classroom activities to “real life.” As Cazden (1977:42) reminds us, “We must always remember that language is learned, not because we want to talk or read or write about language, but because we want to talk and read and write about the world.”

*Environmental issues motivate learners.* Environmental issues such as rain forest destruction and endangered animals are not only real, but they are of considerable interest and relevance to students. Learners of all ages, and children in particular, are fascinated by the problems these issues present.

*The environmental theme can be linked to all areas of the curriculum.* Environmental topics can be linked to every subject in the curriculum—science, history, geography, mathematics, even music and art. By using the environment as a theme, we can help bridge the gap between EFL and other school subjects. Students gain academic knowledge and develop skills that can enhance achievement in all areas of the curriculum.

*Environmental issues provide a useful framework for integrating language skills.* Environmental themes present numerous opportunities for project work and other activities that integrate the four skills. For example, students working in teams to do a “mini-research” project on countries with environmental problems (see Activity #6 below) get to practice reading, note-taking, speaking, listening, and written composition. In addition to providing a framework for the practice of the basic skills, environmental topics can serve as a focus for stimulating the development of higher language skills such as critical thinking, group decision-making, and selective reading.

*Environmental topics encourage interaction.* Environmental issues engage the minds and feelings of learners and encourage real language use. Students are stimulated to discuss the topics, brainstorm solutions, and share their reactions with other students and the teacher.

*Learning about the environment can be fun.* Environmental problems may seem overwhelming, but learning about them doesn’t have to be ponderous or depressing. By using classroom activities that take a positive approach and focus on what we as individuals can do to help save the earth, we can provide students with a particularly enjoyable and satisfying learning experience.

## **A “Global” Approach**

A “global” approach to EFL involves four interdependent and overlapping goals: awareness, concern, skills, and action (Cates 1990; Maley 1992). In addition to practice on specific language skills such as speaking or written composition, each activity described in this article incorporates at least one “global” objective related to the environment.

### **AWARENESS**

Some activities serve as a means of guiding students toward an awareness of the nature of specific environmental problems-their causes, ramifications, and/or potential solutions. Other activities may heighten awareness of how several problems are related, or of how individuals can contribute to solving them.

### **CONCERN**

Some activities provide students with an opportunity to explore their own values and feelings of concern about the environment, and to become motivated to work actively for its protection and improvement.

### **SKILLS**

Some activities focus on acquiring and developing the necessary skills to identify and solve environmental problems. These include communication skills, cooperative problem solving, critical and creative thinking, and informed decision-making-all of which are directly related to language teaching.

### **ACTION**

Some activities provide opportunities for students to get actively involved in doing something to remedy environmental problems.

## **Student-centered Activities**

The activities take an interactive, student-centered approach which provides opportunities for students to work together in pairs, small groups, or teams, pooling their knowledge and learning from one another. Students work together, exchanging information, discussing real issues, solving problems, or performing other specific tasks. In all, the teacher functions as a facilitator, guiding the class through the activities and encouraging the students to discover and learn about environmental issues on their own. Underlying the approach is the conviction that students learn to communicate better if they are presented with stimulating classroom activities in which they are personally involved.

Each activity is presented in the form of a lesson plan. The activities may be used alone, or several may be adapted and combined to make up a more extensive teaching unit. These few

examples represent merely a sample from a wide range of possibilities for introducing the study of environment into language teaching. Imaginative teachers will come up with many other ideas for using environmental themes to stimulate thought and language use among their students.

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## Activity #1

### CONDUCT A POLL

#### AIMS

- to increase awareness of one's own and other students' attitudes toward specific environmental problems
- to practice listening, speaking, writing, mutual decision-making, and summarizing

#### PREPARATION

No special preparation is needed.

#### PROCEDURE

- Divide the class into pairs.
- Tell the students that they are going to have the opportunity to find out their classmates' attitudes toward a specific environmental problem of their own choosing. Explain that they are to work together with their partners, selecting an environmental topic that interests them, and framing a yes/no question that they can use to interview other people in the class. To help the groups get started, you may wish to write one or two examples on the board, e.g.:
  - Do you think our government is doing enough to protect our forests? Why or why not?
  - Are you concerned about the problem of ocean pollution? Why or why not?
- As the pairs work together, circulate among them and provide help as needed.
- When the pairs have finished writing their questions, ask them to move around the room and use their question to interview 8-10 other students. Explain that they should work together with their partner, keeping a record of people's responses and noting down any interesting comments they make.
- Pairs walk around the room, interviewing other students and making a record of the responses.

- When the students have finished all their interviews, have them write a one-page report, summarizing their findings. Remind them to include any interesting comments made by the people they interviewed. (Reports can be done in class or as a homework assignment.)
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## Activity #2

### WHAT DO YOU ALREADY KNOW ABOUT . . . ?

#### AIMS

- to introduce and increase awareness of an environmental topic
- to provide an opportunity for students to evaluate their own prior knowledge of the topic
- to practice reading
- to stimulate discussion

#### PREPARATION

Prepare an 8-10 item true-false or multiple-choice quiz on an environmental topic (see the sample quiz below). Make enough copies of the quiz to give one to each pair of students (or write the quiz on the board or on an overhead transparency).

#### PROCEDURE

- Divide the class into pairs and distribute the quiz. Give one copy to each pair of students.
- Explain to the students that they are going to take a quiz to find out what they already know about the topic. Tell them that they will not be graded on the quiz. The purpose of the quiz is merely to let them find out for themselves what they already know about the subject.
- Make sure that the students understand the questions.
- Students work in pairs, discussing the questions and marking their answers.
- After the pair work, volunteers take turns reporting their answers to the class. As volunteers report, write their answers on the board. If any students disagree, ask them to report their answer to the question at hand. Do not indicate at this stage whether the students' answers are right or wrong.

- After students have reported their answers, read off the correct answers to the class.
- Lead a whole-class discussion centering on the following questions:

1. Did any of the answers surprise you?
2. What did you learn from this quiz?
3. What else would you like to know about the topic?

## FOLLOW UP

As a follow-up, students can work in pairs or small groups, drawing up a list of questions they have about the topic. These questions can form the basis for project work or library research.

## Sample Quiz

### WHAT DO YOU ALREADY KNOW

#### ABOUT RAIN FORESTS?

1. All rain forests are located in hot, tropical areas. True or false?
2. Which three countries contain the world's largest remaining rain forests?
  - a. Brazil, Indonesia, and Zaire
  - b. Brazil, Canada, and the U.S.
  - c. Brazil, Mexico, and Panama
  - d. Australia, Brazil, and Russia
3. How many people live in the world's rain forests?
  - a. 14 thousand
  - b. 14 million
  - c. 140 thousand
  - d. 140 million
4. At what rate are the world's rain forests disappearing?
  - a. 100 acres a day
  - b. 100 acres an hour
  - c. 100 acres a minute
  - d. 100 acres a second
5. What percentage of the world's plant and animal species exist only in rain forests?
  - a. 5 percent
  - b. 15 percent
  - c. 35 percent
  - d. 50 percent

6. At least how many species of insects live in rain forests?

- a. 10 million
- b. 20 million
- c. 30 million
- d. 40 million

7. Which of these woods does not come from a rain forest?

- a. mahogany
- b. black walnut
- c. teak
- d. rosewood

8. Which of these animals does not live in a rain forest?

- a. llama
- b. gorilla
- c. howler monkey
- d. mouse deer

#### Answer Key to Sample Quiz

1. False. A rain forest is any forest where the heavy rainfall leads to dense vegetation. Tropical rain forests are found in hot, tropical areas, but there are also cool rain forests, including one in southeast Alaska; 2a; 3d; 4c; 5c; 6c; 7b; 8a

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### Activity #3

#### WHICH SPECIES WILL YOU SAVE?

##### AIMS

- to explore personal values and feelings about endangered species
- to discuss why some people value some forms of life more than others
- to increase awareness of the ecological importance of all plants and animals
- to practice group decision-making skills, reporting, and writing

##### PREPARATION

- Prepare and duplicate enough copies of the worksheet below to give one to each student.

- Familiarize yourself in a general way with each of the species on the worksheet. For example, be able to explain to the students that a whooping crane is a 5-foot (1.5m) tall bird with black and white feathers and a loud, high-pitched call.

## PROCEDURE

- Divide the class into groups and give each student a copy of the worksheet.
- Go over the directions on the worksheet with the students and answer any questions they have about the species.
- Students work in groups, ranking the plants and animals in the order in which they think they should be saved.
- Groups take turns reporting their rankings to the class. Tally up the results on the board.
- Conduct a whole-class discussion centering on the following questions:
  1. Which forms of life do you think it's more important to save, endangered plants or endangered animals? Why?
  2. On what basis did you decide your ranking? Usefulness to humans? Beauty? Size? Species that live in your country?
  3. Why are some people more interested in saving mammals and birds than they are in saving "lower" plants and animals?
  4. Why are most people more interested in saving larger, more beautiful animals than smaller, less beautiful ones?

## HOMEWORK: MINI-SURVEY

As a homework assignment, ask each student to interview four or five people. They should ask each person to name five endangered species. Have the students summarize their findings in a brief written report and be prepared to read their report to the class. After the reports have been read, follow up with a whole-class discussion of ways to educate people about the importance of all species.

## REMARKS

In addition to the fact that smaller and not-so-glamorous forms of life are just as important as larger, more attractive species, an important point to bring out in the whole-class discussion of this activity is the importance of plant life, i.e., that all living things depend on plants for food, shelter, and many other products.

## Worksheet



## WHICH SPECIES WILL YOU SAVE?

Work in groups. You are members of a team that is working to save the 10 endangered species below. However, you have only enough money and materials to work with one species at a time. Look over the list carefully and then number the plants and animals in the order in which you will try to save them, from 1 (the most important species to save) to 10 (the least important species). Try to reach agreement on the order in which the species should be saved.

\_\_\_\_\_ whooping crane

\_\_\_\_\_ green pitcher plant

\_\_\_\_\_ Indian python

\_\_\_\_\_ humpback whale

\_\_\_\_\_ snow leopard

\_\_\_\_\_ beach mouse

\_\_\_\_\_ giant panda

\_\_\_\_\_ gray bat

\_\_\_\_\_ Philippine eagle

\_\_\_\_\_ birdwing butterfly

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## Activity #4

### ENVIRONMENTAL QUOTES

#### AIMS

- to encourage critical thinking about an environmental topic
- to explore one's own values vis-à-vis the environment
- to provide an opportunity for personal expression
- to practice paraphrasing, discussion, and written composition

#### PREPARATION

- Select an appropriate quotation for the students to react to. Here are some possibilities:

“Mother planet is showing us the red warning light-‘be careful’-she is saying. To take care of the planet is to take care of our own house.” -The Dalai Lama

“The deer, the horse, the great eagle, these are our brothers . . . the earth is our mother . . . all things are connected like the blood which unites one family.” -Chief Seattle (in a letter to U.S. President Franklin Pierce, 1854)

“And this, our life, exempt from public haunt, finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.”  
-William Shakespeare

“Woe to those who add house to house, who join field to field, until there is no more room and they are the sole inhabitants of the land.” -Isaiah 5:8

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” -Margaret Mead

## PROCEDURE

- Write the quotation on the board, but avoid revealing your personal feelings about the quotation.
- Divide the class into small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions (dictate the questions or write them on the board):

1. How would you express the quotation in your own words?

2. Do you agree with the quotation? Why or why not?

- Allow 10-15 minutes for the small-group discussions.
- Ask for volunteers to report the results of their group's discussion to the class.

## FOLLOW-UP

As a follow up or homework assignment, ask the students to write a one or two page reaction to the quotation. You may wish to provide them with the following questions as a starting point:

1. What does the quotation mean to you personally?

2. How does the quotation relate to your own experience?

3. Does the quotation relate to anything you have read?

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## Activity #5

### EARTH POEMS

#### AIMS

- to practice expressing personal attitudes toward saving the earth
- to increase awareness of attitudes and actions that help to protect the planet
- to practice using a parallel poetic form
- to practice using gerunds and abstract nouns

#### PREPARATION

Prepare enough copies of the poem frame below to give one to each student (or put it on the board for students to copy).

#### PROCEDURE

- Distribute the poem frame (or write it on the board for students to copy), and then introduce the activity by saying something like this: “Today you are all going to have the chance to be poets. You can use the poem frame I’ve given you to create your own poem.” Explain that they are to fill in the blanks in the frame with abstract nouns or gerunds. (Note: The resulting poems will probably be more personal and diverse if you refrain from providing particular examples of abstract nouns and gerunds. But if you feel you really need to give examples, you can provide the following examples: joy [abstract noun]; sharing [gerund].)
- Allow students as much time as they need to complete their poems. 10 to 15 minutes should be sufficient. As students write their poems, circulate among them, providing help with spelling and vocabulary as needed.
- After students have completed their poems, divide the class into small groups.
- Students take turns reading their poems to the people in their group.

#### FOLLOW-UP

Students can decorate their poems with drawings. The final results can be displayed on the walls of the classroom for all class members to read.

## Earth Poems

*There is no saving Planet Earth*

Without (1) \_\_\_\_\_

No (1) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (2) \_\_\_\_\_

There is no (2) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (3) \_\_\_\_\_

No (3) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (4) \_\_\_\_\_

There is no (4) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (5) \_\_\_\_\_

No (5) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (6) \_\_\_\_\_

There is no (6) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (7) \_\_\_\_\_

No (7) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (8) \_\_\_\_\_

There is no (8) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (9) \_\_\_\_\_

No (9) \_\_\_\_\_

Without (10) \_\_\_\_\_

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## Activity #6

### MY NEIGHBORHOOD, MY ENVIRONMENT

#### AIMS

- to increase awareness of the functions that a neighborhood serves
- to increase awareness of the positive and negative effects that people can have on a neighborhood
- to practice note-taking, listening, taking dictation, and discussion
- to practice using descriptive language

#### PREPARATION

Prepare enough copies of the worksheet to give one to each student (or draw it on the board for students to copy). Students will also need surfaces to write on while they are outdoors. If notebooks or clipboards are not available, assemble enough pieces of cardboard to give one to each student.

#### PROCEDURE

- Ask the class to name all the places they might find in a neighborhood. As students call out their answers, list them on the board under the following four headings:

work places living spaces recreation spaces wildlife spaces

- Divide the class into teams of four and distribute the worksheet.
- Explain the task to the students. They are going to take a walking tour of the school neighborhood. Each student in a group will be responsible for recording information about one type of place in the neighborhood.
- Review the items on the task sheet to make sure that all the students understand them.
- Take the students on a walking tour of the neighborhood. Groups stay together and share their observations and reactions.
- When you return to the classroom, dictate the following questions to the class:
  1. What things make some living spaces more attractive?
  2. How could living spaces in the neighborhood be improved?

3. How do work spaces improve the neighborhood?
4. What negative effects do they have?
5. How could work spaces in the neighborhood be improved?
6. Are there enough spaces for wildlife?
7. How can we help wild animals survive in the neighborhood?
8. Are there enough recreation spaces in the neighborhood?
9. If not, what can we do to create more?
10. What can you do to improve the neighborhood environment?

- Students discuss the questions in their groups.
- Conduct a whole-class discussion of the questions.

## FOLLOW-UP

As a follow-up, students can write letters to local officials, owners of work places, etc., giving their suggestions for improving the neighborhood environment.

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## Activity #7

### ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS STORIES

#### AIMS

- to increase knowledge about an environmental issue
- to practice predicting the content of a TV news report or documentary
- to stimulate discussion
- to practice listening, active viewing skills, and note-taking

#### PREPARATION

Select a 3-5 minute sequence from a TV news report or documentary about an environmental issue, one in which the situation is quickly and clearly established. Reports on such topics as endangered animal species, rain forest destruction, and ocean plastic pollution work particularly well since they usually provide rich pictorial content that can aid students' comprehension. Avoid sequences that are mainly composed of "talking heads." Write the following list on the board:

#### TOPIC SIGHTS WORDS SOUNDS SMELLS

#### PROCEDURE

### *Stage 1: Previewing/Predicting*

- Divide the class into pairs.
- Tell the students that they are going to see the beginning of a news report (or documentary). Their task is to predict what the whole sequence will be like in terms of the headings on the list.
- Play enough of the video sequence to establish the topic. 30 seconds should be sufficient.
- In pairs, students discuss and write down the following information under each heading:

TOPIC the subject of the sequence

SIGHTS things they expect to see

WORDS words they expect to hear

SOUNDS sounds they expect to hear

SMELLS things they might smell if they were there

- Elicit ideas from the students and write them on the board under the headings.
- Play the rest of the sequence. Students circle the items that they actually see, hear, or would be able to smell.

### *Stage 2: Global Viewing*

- Put the following chart on the board for the students to copy.

Who?	
What?	
Where?	
When?	
Why?	
How?	

- Tell the students that they are going to see the video sequence two more times. Their task is to watch, then to watch again and take notes about the “five W’s and H” of the topic:

Who is it about?

What is it about?

Where did it happen?

When did it happen?

Why did it happen?

How did it happen?

- Play the sequence twice. First, the students watch. The second time, they make brief notes to answer the question words.
- Students compare answers with their partners.
- Volunteers report how much they understood.

### *Stage 3: Follow-up*

As a follow-up, students can write a short news article based on the video sequence.

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## Activity #8

### ENERGY CONTRACTS

#### AIMS

- to practice using gerunds
- to motivate “green” behavior
- to practice writing and discussion

#### PREPARATION

Make enough copies of the “Energy Contract” shown here to give one to each student (or copy it on the board).

#### PROCEDURE

- Write the following sentence stem on the board:

I can save energy by . . .

- Introduce the topic of energy conservation by reminding the class that energy production is one of the main causes of problems such as air pollution and acid rain. Ask them to think about how they might complete the sentence on the board. Write an example on the board, e.g.,

. . . turning off the light when I am the last person to walk out of a room.

- Elicit ideas from the class. As students give their ideas, list them on the board.



- Distribute the contract (or write it on the board for students to copy).
- Ask the students to complete and sign the contract.
- Tell the class that they have now made a contract and that they must now do as they have promised. At the end of two weeks, they will have the opportunity to evaluate their results.

### Follow-Up

At the end of two weeks, conduct a whole-class discussion centering on the following questions:

1. Were you successful in meeting the energy-saving goals you set for yourself two weeks ago?
2. What difficulties did you encounter?
3. Do you think you will make any of your goals a regular part of your life-style? If so, which ones?

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